

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

EPA to clean up abandoned waste site that has plagued Houston neighborhood



Johnny Hanson, Staff

Daymon Thomas, 7, says he can smell the chemicals at the abandoned hazardous waste site from the front yard of his home in south Houston.

By Matthew Tresaugue

August 25, 2014 | Updated: August 25, 2014 9:37pm

The federal government said Monday it will step in to clean up an abandoned industrial waste facility that has afflicted a south Houston neighborhood for years.

The Environmental Protection Agency plans to spend at least \$500,000 to remove containers with hazardous chemicals – such as cancer-causing benzene and

methyl ethyl ketone, a nose- and throat-irritating solvent – from the CES Environmental Services site on Griggs Road.

The move comes four years after the Houston-based company filed for bankruptcy and shuttered the facility, which had run afoul of neighbors and regulators over odors, dumping, explosions and an on-the-job death.

To those living near the facility, the EPA's plan was welcome news. But they questioned why it had taken so long for regulators to act and how far the government-led cleanup would go.

"We don't deserve to have to live like this," said Roselyn Johnson, who has lived near the polluted site for 11 years and suffers from chronic lung disease. "The pressure will stay on and we won't stop" until the eight-acre property is fully restored, Johnson said.

Heavy rains recently washed a harmful bisque of chemicals into Johnson's neighborhood. She said the odor from the rust-colored runoff burned her nose and immediately made her head ache.

The site is near houses, three schools and a church – the product and proof of Houston's lack of zoning.

Before closing the plant, CES cleaned truck trailers, recycled oil and packaged waste for transport and disposal.

The company's customers included oil refineries and chemical plants along the Houston Ship Channel.



Johnny Hanson, Staff

Since CES Environmental Services filed for bankruptcy four years ago, its property in south Houston has not been secured to prevent releases of toxic chemicals, the EPA says.

Since the company filed for bankruptcy in August 2010, the property has not been managed or secured to prevent releases of the dangerous chemicals, the EPA said. Vandals have caused at least two spills since March.

The federal agency said the property's fencing has been repaired to eliminate open access. But the fix will not prevent "those intent on criminal mischief" from entering the site, the agency said.

The next step will be to determine what's in the containers and then move them off-site for proper disposal. The EPA also will clean up visible spills on the property.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality said it is assisting with some cleanup efforts, primarily the disposal of waste.

The cleanup effort should be completed by February, EPA spokesman Joe Hubbard said.

Hubbard said CES has primary responsibility for cleaning up the site, but the bankrupt company's lack of funds slowed efforts.

"There is a real need to get the site cleaned up," he said. "It's always been on our radar but there has been more concern since the vandalism."

David Askanase, a Houston lawyer who serves as trustee for the CES bankruptcy estate, declined comment.

Tiffany Hogue, policy director for the Texas Organizing Project, which has assisted the site's neighbors, said the EPA's plan is a good start but doesn't go far enough.

It will take more money to demolish the remaining structures on the property and to dig up any chemical-laden soil.

"You cannot leave chemicals there and expect nothing to happen," Hogue said. "This is a residential area."

RELATED

Protesters urge hasty cleanup at abandoned chemical plant

Defunct facility, owner named in federal indictment

Houston waste firm CES files for bankruptcy

CES Environmental fined \$1.5 million



HEARST *newspapers*

© 2013 Hearst Newspapers, LLC.